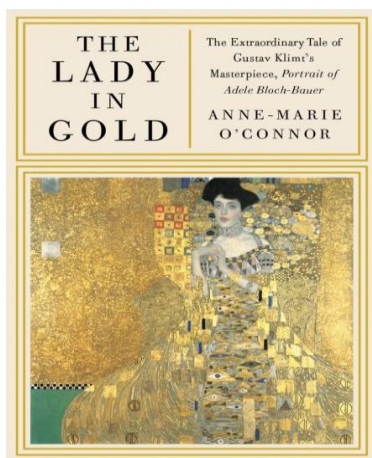


Antonela CORBAN¹

Gustav Klimt's Lady in Gold²

(Anne- Marie O'Connor, *The Lady in Gold: The Extraordinary Tale of Gustav Klimt's Masterpiece, Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012)



Abstract In 2012, 150 years from the birth of the Austrian painter Gustav Klimt were celebrated. It is the year when several volumes dedicated to the painter were published, some of them providing a general view of his life and work, others presenting certain periods in his life or his less known creations. The volume *The Lady in Gold: The Extraordinary Tale of Gustav Klimt's Masterpiece, Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer*, falls under the latter category: the book, written by Anne-Marie O'Connor, presents the history of the appearance of the famous portrait and the complex events it has gone through up to the present.

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In 1903, Klimt visited Ravenna, where he was deeply impressed by the mosaics in the Christian churches of the city. Back in Austria, he started

¹ PhD "Al.I.Cuza" University of Iași, Romania & University of Burgundy, Dijon, France

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combining his own methods of representation with various golden details reminiscent of these mosaics. For this reason, his paintings of this period are said to be created in the “golden style” or “Byzantine style”; these paintings impress through a successful combination of naturalistically represented details with decorative and symbolic elements. One of these paintings is *Adele Bloch-Bauer's Portrait*, which is the central topic of the book reviewed here.

The painting was confiscated by the Nazis, then remained in Austria for many years. Maria Altmann, Adele Bauer's niece, sued the Austrian government asking to have five paintings by Klimt returned, one of which was Adele's portrait. Once the painting was retrieved in 2006, it was soon sold. It was purchased by the cosmetics magnate Ronald Lauder, whose overt intention was to put together a collection consisting of the paintings retrieved from the Nazis and to exhibit it at Neue Galerie in New York. “This is our Mona Lisa”, he would say about the portrait bought for 135 million dollars, the highest price ever paid for a painting up to that moment. (Since then things have changed and the highest price paid for a painting is more than 250 million dollars for *The Card Players* by Cezanne).

The time from the completion of this work in 1907 until its retrieval in 2006 is presented in detail in Anne-Marie O'Connor's book *The Lady in Gold*, which she organized in three parts, each corresponding to a period in the history of the painting.

The first part, entitled *Emancipation*, analyses the social, cultural, political and economic context in which the main characters of the book live: Klimt and Adele. A detailed image is created about the people and their age (for instance, Sigmund Freud, Gustav Mahler); the author extends the analysis, bringing details even about Emperor Franz Josef and his lover, actress Katharina Schratt, as well as about Empress Elisabeth, beloved in Austria as “Sisi”. The economic and banking activity of numerous Jewish families is described, too: they were recognized as possessing significant financial resources in Austria. At the same time, the cultural and entertainment activity on Ringstraße is presented. (“It was 1898, and the devil himself seemed to dance in Vienna”.)

The author first presents Adela's Bloch-Bauer's biography, followed by that of Klimt. Adele was the daughter of a rich Jew, who was the head of an important Habsburg bank and the head of the Oriental Railway. She was married to Ferdinand Bloch, a Czech sugar-beet baron, who, on account of

their financial possibilities, succeeded in organizing an impressive salon, frequented by important Viennese intellectual figures and artists of the time. One of them was Gustav Klimt, whose friends used to call him *der König* – the King. “At thirty-five, Klimt was a king of Vienna art world” (p.8). The book introduces several periods of the artist’s life: his childhood in the family of a humble gold engraver (an important detail considering the use of gold in many of Gustav’s works); the studying years in *Kunstgewerbeschule* (School of Applied Arts), the creation of *Künstlercompagnie* (Artists’ Company) together with his brother Ernst and with Franz Matsch, and several important artistic commissions he got in this period; the formation of Secession in 1897 and Klimt’s appointment as its president.

In 1903, Ferdinand Bloch commissioned Klimt to paint a portrait which was apparently not the first for which Adele sat. In 1901, Judith in the painting *Judith* bears a striking resemblance with Adele. There were even rumours about a possible affair between the two.

O’Connor provides many details related to the creation of the famous portrait. For instance, she mentions that the painter produced around a hundred sketches in pencil on manila paper before he reached the final version completed in 1907. To emphasize Klimt’s painting manner specific of the golden period, the author even provides details related to Empress Theodora represented on one of the Ravenna mosaics.

A very important aspect should also be noted here: 1907 is the year when Hitler was rejected by the Viennese Art Academy, where he had applied for a scholarship. This was subsequently obtained by Oscar Kokoschka, who would say later: “If it had been the other way around, I would have run the world quite differently”. However, Hitler was not successful in 1908 either, the reason for his rejection being that his drawings showed a lack of talent for artistic painting. What the board meant was that the representations of the human body were absent from his work and that he had, however, a good eye for architectural representations.

In the second part of the book, *Love and Betrayal*, another important character features, namely Maria, nee Bloch-Bauer, Adele’s niece. In 1937, she was married to a Polish opera singer, Fritz Altmann. Not much later, in 1938, Austria is annexed (*der Anschluss*) and their fascinating life turns into a nightmare. One of those who had to leave Vienna was Adele’s husband (she had died in 1925, and Klimt in 1918); Fritz was incarcerated in Dachau. Their property is confiscated, their palace and the objects in it are disposed

of by the occupants. Due to Goebbels's order that the "degenerate" Jewish art should be destroyed, Adele's Jewish name was removed from the painting, so that all reference to the character should be obliterated. As Klimt himself was not despised by the Nazis, they exhibited the portrait in the Belvedere Palace under the title *The Lady in Gold*. The art the Nazis considered "degenerate" was in effect the art of the expressionists, one of them being Oskar Kokoschka.

After the war, a part of the pieces confiscated were returned to the state, but not to private persons. This was because the Austrian officials considered that all these paintings were "as symbols of their country", to quote O'Connor.

In the third part of the book, *Atonement*, Maria Altmann's legal action is presented; she was then living in America and was 82 in 1998; she sued the state to retrieve her property rights over Klimt's paintings that had been once confiscated. She was supported in her action by several relatives; the starting point had been the new law passed in Austria regarding the works of art looted by the Nazis. This section goes on to present the steps taken by Randol Schönberg, composer Arnold Schönberg's grandson, an ambitious young lawyer who acted on Maria's behalf. Through his incessant efforts, he managed to obtain Adele's famous portrait and four other paintings in June 2006, as mentioned in the beginning of this review.

It should be said that the topic of Adele Bloch-Bauer's portrait and its long and adventurous story had also been tackled in *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain, from Vienna 1900 to the Present* (2012) by Eric Kandel or the film *The Rape of Europa* (2008), made by Richard Berge, Bonni Cohen, Nicole Newnham.

In the end, we return to the relation between Klimt and Adele, of whose nature we cannot, however, tell anything precisely except that she had sat for the painter for another portrait in 1912. However, from Anne-Marie O'Connor's conversations with Maria Altmann (in order to collect data for the book reviewed here) it can be seen that the latter implied that they were linked by more than just a friendly relationship. "People always asked me, did your aunt have a mad affair with Klimt? My sister thought so. My mother – she was very Victorian – said 'How dare you say that? It was an intellectual friendship.' [...] "My darling, she said finally, Adele was a modern woman, living in the world of yesterday." (*Prologue*)